DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 430 245 CS 216 709

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TITLE A Lifelong Middle School Teacher Never Stops Learning: The Case of Cathy Starr.
INSTITUTION National Research Center on English Learning and Achievement, Albany, NY.
SPONS AGENCY Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), Washington, DC.
REPORT NO CELA-RN-12005
PUB DATE 1999-00-00
NOTE 34p.
CONTRACT R305A60005
PUB TYPE Reports - Evaluative (142)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Administrator Role; Case Studies; *Classroom Environment; Classroom Techniques; *English Curriculum; *English Instruction; *English Teachers; Grade 7; *Middle School Teachers; Middle Schools

ABSTRACT

A case study introduced Cathy Starr, a seventh grade language arts teacher in a school known for its excellence in English/language arts instruction, and described a two year in-depth research and observation study on how Starr teaches language arts and what influences her professional life has on her approach and instruction. Hudson Middle School, where Starr teaches, and the Schoonhavn district along with the support of a strong suburban community, benefits from the visionary leadership of Hope Anderson and Kim Lehrer, who were the driving forces in the area of staff development and curriculum planning in the district and in the middle school. The professional life at Hudson is enriched with an "expectation of participation and input" from the teachers from developing the curriculum to district-sponsored activities to department meetings to classroom learning. Starr teacher language arts with a great deal of interaction with her colleagues. Her main goal as an educator is to learn more about engaging students in thinking about literature. The system allows an experimental environment that encourages students and teachers to take risks. She teaches language arts energetically with a focus on student interaction, lots of reading, writing, and discussion, and lots of student questions. (Contains a Seventh Grade Language Arts Final Examination, four references, a list of five related reports and case studies from the Excellence in English Research Project, and a survey instrument.) (SC)

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Eija Rougle

CELA Report Number 12005

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Report Series 12005
http://cela.albany.edu/starr/index.html/
1999

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I wish to express my warmest thanks to the Schoonhavn learning community, the students and, in particular, the teacher who so graciously let me in her professional life and who touched me by her wisdom-in-action. I also wish to extend my appreciation to Jillion Killion, whose insightful comments helped to strengthen this paper as well as editors Paula Preller, Janet Angelis, and Laura Morrill.

And lastly, my sincere and warm thanks to Judith A. Langer, principal investigator of the inquiry this case study is part of. I appreciate the guidance and support I have felt during every phase of this work.

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The Center on English Learning & Achievement (CELA) is a national research and development center located at the University at Albany, State University of New York, in collaboration with the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Additional research is conducted at the Universities of Georgia and Washington.

The Center, established in 1987, initially focused on the teaching and learning of literature. In March 1996, the Center expanded its focus to include the teaching and learning of English, both as a subject in its own right and as it is learned in other content areas. CELA's work is sponsored by the Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI), U.S. Department of Education, as part of the National Institute on Student Achievement, Curriculum, and Assessment.

This report is based on research supported in part under the Research and Development Centers Program (award number R305A60005) as administered by OERI. However, the contents do not necessarily represent the positions or policies of the Department of Education, OERI, or the Institute on Student Achievement.

9904-12005

FOREWORD

The school door you will open as you read this case study reveals a very special place. Here students are actively involved in becoming highly literate; they are learning how language works in context and how to use it to advantage for specific purposes. Here, too, teachers are supported in their efforts to improve their teaching and to grow as professionals.

What makes this kind of environment possible? A team of field researchers and I have been exploring this question in a major five-year project for the National Research Center on English Learning & Achievement (CELA). This case study is one part of that project, which involves 15 other English programs nationwide. Each is providing English instruction to middle and high school students. Most are exemplary; some are more typical and give us points of contrast. Overall our study examines the contexts that lead to thought-provoking learning in English classes and the professional contexts that support such learning. This case report offers a portrait of one teacher within the contexts of both her school and her profession. We offer it to provide food for thought and a model for action for readers or groups of readers who wish to improve the English language arts learning of their own students.

The programs we are studying represent great diversity in student populations, educational problems, and approaches to improvement. The reports and case studies that comprise this project (listed at the end of this report) don't compare programs with one another; nor do they characterize programs as process-oriented, traditional, or interdisciplinary. Instead, they provide a conception of what "English" is as it is enacted in the classrooms of our best teachers, how these teachers have reconciled the various voices and trends within the professional community in their own practices, how their schools and districts support and encourage their efforts, and how in turn the contexts they create in their classrooms shape the high literacy learning of their students. The results have implications for curriculum, instruction, and assessment, as well as policy decisions, in English and the language arts.

For my first cross-cutting report, *Excellence in English in Middle and High School: How Teachers' Professional Lives Support Student Achievement*, I analyzed the data across all case studies for overarching patterns. In it, I identify and discuss particular features of teachers' professional experiences that permeate these special programs.

I am profoundly grateful for the cooperation and vision of the teachers and administrators who contributed their time and ideas so generously and so graciously to this project. It was indeed a privilege for the field researchers and me to enter into their worlds of learning — a place I now invite you to visit and learn from in the following pages.

Judith A. Langer
Director, CELA
March 1999

A Lifelong Middle School Teacher Never Stops Learning: The Case of Cathy Starr

Eija Rougle

Introduction

Cathy Starr teaches seventh grade language arts in a school and district known for its excellence in English/language arts instruction. This case study, prepared after two years of research, observations, and regular communication with Starr, provides a picture of the kind of rich professional environment Starr works within as well as the exemplary ways in which Starr uses her growing knowledge of teaching language arts. This portrait of Starr is one part of a five-year, Excellence in English study, directed by Judith Langer of the National Research Center on English Learning & Achievement (see Foreword).

Grounded in a sociocultural perspective on language and thought (Bakhtin, 1986; Langer, 1987; Vygotsky; 1962, 1986), the Excellence in English study focuses on contexts and processes of teaching and learning English. The study is also inspired by Bakhtin's theory of dialogism. According to Bakhtin, the very act of understanding is a result of interacting and responding voices. The study seeks to trace and uncover layers of "voices" embedded in teachers' professional communities and then examine the impact these "voices" have on instruction.

In order to best understand Starr's professional life and her classroom, I watched her teach and followed her to team and department meetings, in-school workshops, and outside retreats. I rounded up information from her colleagues, administrators, and support staff, which helped explain the larger school context. In addition, whenever possible, I collected district documents, curriculum guides, and statistics on standardized tests. Data also included district/school/team newsletters, calendars, and informational brochures. In order to understand the school as a learning environment, I also checked school board minutes, walked the school grounds and corridors, and spent time in teachers' lounges and staff rooms.

After a lengthy, semi-constructed, initial interview with Starr, I collected data through her reflective log as well as weekly contacts with her, either by visits to the classrooms, through telephone conversations, or e-mails. I observed about ten lessons and had frequent and regular

conversations about lesson plans and her reflections after classes. In order to get students' perspectives, I regularly interviewed a group of six students, representing a range of abilities, who volunteered to participate. I collected and copied student work: essays with multiple drafts, journals, portfolios, writing folders, work-in-progress folders, tests, quizzes, and "visuals." Almost all of the interviews, debriefings, and classroom observations were audio taped and later transcribed; some were videotaped.

After first introducing Hudson Middle School and the Schoonhavn district in which Starr teaches I describe Starr's professional life — within and outside of her school. I then show how Starr teaches language arts, and finally, discuss the influences her professional life has on her approach and instruction. I also refer you to Judith Langer's *Excellence in English in Middle and High School: How Teachers' Professional Lives Support Student Achievement* (CELA Report #12002),[1] for a discussion of the findings from the broader study of which this case is a part.

THE HENRY O. HUDSON SCHOOL AND ITS COMMUNITY[2]

The suburban community of Schoonhavn, where Cathy Starr has been teaching language arts for almost thirty years, has a longstanding reputation for providing successful schools. Schoonhavn is a stable, middle class community whose population is mostly white, professional, families who commute to work in neighboring cities.

People often move to Schoonhavn because of its excellent schools. Since 1990 student enrollment has climbed steadily, increasing 20%. The total district enrollment in the 1995-1996 academic year was 5,330 students. The district consists of five elementary schools (K-5), the Henry O. Hudson Middle School (6-8), and a high school. Encouraging partnerships between community members and the Schoonhavn schools is a district priority. Indeed, the schools seem to play an important role in the life of the community.

The school district has had a long tenure of visionary leaders. Two in particular are mentioned

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1. http://cela.albany.edu/eie1/index.html or contact the National Research Center on English Learning & Achievement.

2. All names in this case study are pseudonyms.

quite frequently by Starr: Hope Anderson and Kim Lehrer. At the time of this study (1996-1998), these two women were the driving forces in the area of staff development and curriculum planning in the district and in the middle school. Hope Anderson, the assistant superintendent responsible for instruction and staff development, served in the district for more than two decades, until she was named head of a national professional organization. Kim Lehrer, supervisor of language arts, reading, and social studies at Hudson Middle School, has been an inspiring and supportive link between the district and the middle school staff for over twenty years.

The town of Schoonhavn is near the state capital, and this proximity, along with the district's record of success, has helped to facilitate and sustain collaboration between Schoonhavn teachers and the state education department. In the formulation of educational standards for the state, Schoonhavn administrators and teachers have frequently been invited to participate and share their expertise as teachers of language arts.

Hudson, Schoonhàvn's one middle school, sits among green fields and community gardens at the edge of some woods. Student-made hay statues flank the flagpole near the main entrance. Inside the two-story brick building, visitors are greeted with a large "Welcome" sign and with warm smiles from both students and staff members. The walls and showcases celebrate student work of all kinds (e.g., volunteering in a soup kitchen, conserving a butterfly habitat), and "a yellow brick road" made of 3" x 5" notecards summarizing students' and teachers' favorite books connects all classrooms in the school to the library. Students carrying stacks of books, binders, and folders in their arms transfer peacefully from one classroom to another. No bells are heard marking the periods. Student announcers begin and end the day via an internal TV broadcast. The school gives a feeling of a bustling, positive, and orderly learning community.

Hudson's student population is ethnically, linguistically, and socio-economically homogenous. Over 90% of the students are White; 0.5% are classified as limited English proficient; and 3.6% are eligible for free or reduced lunch (compared to 37 % statewide). Mainstreaming has added a level of diversity to Hudson's classrooms, for special education and physically challenged students are part of every class (specific aides are often assigned to these students).

Hudson students perform better than students in other comparable statewide public schools in all academic performance tests. As an example, in 1996-97, 99% of Hudson's sixth graders performed above the state reference point on the reading section of the Pupil Evaluation Program

(PEP test) compared to 95% of sixth graders in the county and 86% in the state. In addition, 84.4% of Hudson's sixth graders performed "with distinction," in comparison to 71.9% within the county and 53.2% within the state. Eighth graders take the Program Competency Test (PCT). In 1997, 97% of Hudson's students performed above the state reference point in reading and 99%, in writing. The high school graduation rate is 97%, and the rate of students going on to institutions of higher education is 90%. The student-teacher ratio is approximately 1/13. Of the 92 full-time classroom teachers, 80% have earned a degree beyond the bachelor's degree (School Report Card, State Education Department, 1997).

Though Hudson serves more than 1,200 sixth, seventh, and eighth graders, students don't feel overwhelmed by the large size. The school building was designed to give the feeling of a small school. Students are assigned to one of three rectangular "houses," where they attend all their academic classes. Each house is connected to a large round building that holds the cafetorium and spaces for noisier activities such as music and art classrooms, a TV studio, a computer center, and offices. The carpeted corridors connecting the houses to the main round building form two inner courtyards. During this study, a butterfly house was being built in one of these courtyards. The school's two gyms are attached to the back side of the houses. Each house features a faculty room with desks grouped together in fours. There is also a large staff lounge with couches, round tables, and coffee and soda machines.

Both teachers and students are grouped into grade-level teams. For example, Starr is part of an interdisciplinary team of four seventh-grade teachers (language arts, social studies, science, and math) that is responsible for teaching approximately 110 seventh graders in the "Totem House." The teacher team assigns these 110 students into four heterogeneous classes, and they regroup these classes after each ten-week marking period. Thus Starr teaches language arts to four classes of seventh graders who are all on the same team in "Totem House." The purpose for this team approach is explained in a school document, "Interdisciplinary Teaming:"

> The purpose of teaming at Henry O. Hudson Middle School is to provide a structure that will promote, to the greatest degree possible, academic success for every student in the school. Through teaming, the school is able to allow small groups of teachers to work with a portion of the student body. These teaching teams are able to use their shared teaching expertise, daily opportunities for team planning, and extra contact time, as well as working with colleagues and parents or using in-house and community resources to meet the needs of their students. The team structure provides the flexibility, creativity,

> and organization to meet student's individual needs. The structure is designed so that students can be known well and feel a sense of belonging and connection. Teams are expected to collaborate and help each to bring about student success and in the process support each other's growth and learning.

As suggested above, the teacher teams meet daily and have shared planning time. Usually all four of the teachers are present at parent conferences, as are the assigned student counselors. Teachers also meet in disciplinary grade-level teams (e.g., Starr meets with all the seventh grade language arts teachers). Thus the practical work rests on two "horizontal" teams: the interdisciplinary team is one leg, the disciplinary team is the other. In department meetings (which sometimes combine social studies and language arts), teachers in the same discipline meet across the grades (e.g., sixth, seventh, and eighth grade language arts teachers). This organizational structure allows for many contexts in which teachers can interact with each other professionally.

Hudson offers an extensive variety of other activities and support programs. For example, teachers are available during one period a day specifically for tutoring. Thus the tutoring is integrated with daily instruction. In addition, the school offers "Strive for Success." This evening activity involves parents coming to school to work with their children on study skills. Another offering, "Seven to Eight Team," is designed to help at-risk students with their academic skills and with issues of trust. Twelve seventh graders and twelve eighth graders receive individual attention each day from a school counselor. For enrichment, the school offers activities open to everyone such as a debate group, a math olympiad, a law club, a history group, and a mythology club, which meet before school begins in the morning.

In line with the district priority to invite "parents, staff, and other community members to explore, understand, and participate in ways that support learning for all," Hudson encourages community links and parent involvement. The eighteen-member school "cabinet," which makes schoolwide decisions, includes three parents. The brochure, "Get to know your school," outlines over a dozen different types of parent volunteer opportunities. For instance parents are invited to assist students with research, to read to them, and to help in the learning and computer centers. Hudson's community resource coordinator matches parents' interests with students' needs. The school also offers activities designed to include parents, such as the family evening at a local ice hockey stadium that Starr's team planned.

Community links are varied. For example, as part of a U.S. Department of Education Goals 2000 grant, the district partnered with a local writer's institute to organize a discussion on evolutional biology at the nearby university. Students were able to discuss issues with and ask questions of the well-known scientist, author, and professor, Stephen Jay Gould. During Hudson's "Disability Month," the school invited many speakers from the community to give presentations at the school, including one of Starr's former students, who is blind. Students are also encouraged to volunteer in the community. They may help senior citizens in nursing homes, assist with reading programs in libraries, or work with after-school programs in the community center.

"Recognition Breakfasts" honor and congratulate students for their performances. Teachers nominate students, and approximately 40 are chosen based on merits of achievement, steady improvement and effort, and supportiveness to fellow students.

The following words in a Schoonhavn brochure seem to summarize the exemplary environment of the Schoonhavn school community: "At Schoonhavn, every student is important, every staff member is part of the educational team, every parent is treated as a key player, and every community member is welcome in our schools."

Cathy Starr's Professional Life

Starr is a veteran teacher with a bachelor's degree in English education and a master's degree in reading. After teaching about 15 years, she went back to school to earn her advanced degree. Most of her career has involved teaching middle school students in Schoonhavn. However, she started teaching more than 30 years ago on Long Island. There, she explains, administrators handed down the curriculum and assessments to teachers, allowing no opportunities for input. In fact, she was simply given "a course outline based on following the [assigned] grammar and literature books." In Schoonhavn, she found quite a different view of the teacher's role:

> When I arrived in Schoonhavn, I was surprised to find teachers designing programs and selecting tests and paperbacks. That was new to me, but not to teachers in Schoonhavn. This expectation of participation and input was fostered by a strong in-service program and supported by opportunities to attend workshops and conferences.

At Schoonhavn this "expectation of participation and input" is fostered on every level, from curriculum development to district-sponsored activities to department meetings to classroom learning. Providing the time, opportunities, and kind of environment that encourage teachers to share their thoughts and ideas, learn from each other, expose themselves to new approaches and processes, contribute their experiences, and reflect on their own practice has been a top priority at Schoonhavn. Anderson, the assistant superintendent responsible for instruction and staff development, explained in an interview: "You have to create the situations that allow for the thinking to happen, [and] not only create the situations, but the climate — that [input] is expected, that your ideas are going to be seriously considered."

Anderson let teachers know that "We can't do without your mind. We need everybody's mind." In fact, when asked about her goals for language arts, Anderson explained that she worked *with* teams to develop agreed-upon goals and that she feels it is very important that goals be developed in a collaborative way. She added, "My ideas become stronger as I hear others think, and it also helps me to clarify my ideas." As a result, "We begin to really say what we mean as we question one another."

The opportunities for such professional discourse and interaction abound at Schoonhavn. "How could you possibly even describe all the interactions that go on here?" says Starr as she tries to explain this invaluable aspect of her professional life:

> The interaction with colleagues in this building is a total part of whoever I am. It's such a different experience from when I taught on Long Island. It's not fair to compare because I'm sure it's different today, but . . . [then] you came in, you did your job, and you went home. You may have said hello or [had] lunch with some people, but you didn't really do an awful lot of professional sharing. There's a lot of professional conversation that goes on here every day. Some of it is planned; some of it is informal.

Interdisciplinary Teams

Starr meets with the three other teachers on her team (science, social studies, and math) every morning at 9:00. They gather in Totem's faculty room around the four teacher desks to plan together and to discuss how to support the students they serve. The stated purposes of these daily team meetings are to:

identify learning results for students on the team and planning to achieve these;

b. integrate curriculum and share instructional strategies that develop student learning and meet the learning needs of individual students;

c. organize and schedule the instructional program within their team;

d. consult with teachers who are not team members but teach the same group of students [e.g., art, music, home and careers, and technology education];

e. develop a positive, respecting learning community for the members of the team;

f. hold a case conference on specific students;

g. develop student learning results, grading policies, assessments, and shared rubrics;

h. share strategies that meet the needs of the diversity of students on the team;

i. develop student study skills;

j. develop research goals (Hudson Middle School: Interdisciplinary Teaming).

As an example, during one observed team meeting, the four teachers were discussing an interdisciplinary unit on Mayan culture/symbol systems. As they shared ideas about how to best proceed with the unit, the science teacher suggested that students should take notes and underline while reading the text. Starr shared her understanding of thoughtful reading by adding: "I tell [the students] when they underline: 'Put in the margin why. Explain, at least give a reason.' [This] encourages . . . good strategies with note taking" (team meeting notes, 1/15/97).

Language Arts Colleagues at Hudson

Starr's interactions with language arts teachers at Hudson are truly an integral part of her day. As she chronicled them in her log during one typical day, she had chatted with eight different colleagues at various times. Some of the discussions dealt with students, some were about sharing material, a personal memory, or an impression of a book. Sometimes when there is a need (and time available), the seventh grade language arts teachers meet. These meetings Starr called "a gift" (field notes, 1/7/97), alluding to the value teachers place on the time they can spend discussing discipline-related issues. This group of seventh-grade language arts teachers is a

supportive network. Starr refers to them as colleagues but also as "friends, neighbors, car pool buddies, and roommates during conferences." She wrote in her log about their formal and informal meetings this way:

> Ordinarily we schedule occasional meetings as we please, usually at 8:00 a.m. These are not required; they are our meetings, scheduled by us when we feel the need. . . . I was trying to decide why this meeting seemed ordinary to me. Perhaps it's because we exchange ideas continuously in informal ways, and we don't require meetings or outside influences to do that. . . . We will talk about something we are doing. Often it is that spontaneous sharing of excitement over a successful lesson or unit. We exchange papers, new ideas, etc.

Other types of informal meetings include "a coffee group" that gets together daily and a "book club" that meets several times a year. All of these contacts build care and concern among the staff.

Once a month there is a contractual hour-long meeting from 3:30 to 4:30. This hour is often used for department meetings, although if there is a need for an all-staff or all-house meeting, that will occur instead. According to Starr, "the department is another place where there's a lot of support." Lehrer, the language arts department head, sets the tone for department meetings. She uses this time when the teachers come together as a way to support professional development. As she explains:

> My primary goal is to help people move forward as individuals . . . [and] as a department — to be sure that we're sharing a vision, that we are involved very actively in what's going on in our field. I guess [I'm] more than a facilitator, sometimes an agitator (interview, 4/18/97).

Lehrer sees department meetings as opportunities for thinking and for helping teachers stretch their knowledge. For example, she says, "My goal is for everyone to leave at the end of a meeting, which is the last hour of the day (4:30), energized and wanting to learn more, think more about something that we've talked about" (interview, 4/18/97).

During one observed department meeting, Lehrer and the teachers were discussing state-developed standards for writing and the types of writing samples to be collected in students' writing folders. The atmosphere was very thoughtful, ideas were tossed around and discussed, and questions were raised. For example, Starr raised a concern about the genres listed on the state's guidelines, which were handed out at the meeting. "I still have a problem — something is

not captured. [There is] no place to show students' personal writing. [This is] something for the cabinet to consider." In this way Starr was reiterating part of her writing curriculum and putting on the floor an important aspect of writing. Another teacher talked about the limitations of the suggested listing.

In this meeting, the intellectual dialogue about larger issues (in this case, genres of writing) was privileged because it was given all the meeting time. Whereas no time was spent on the other item on the agenda, which dealt with the onus of reporting about how and when conventions are being taught. This detailed information was passed out as a handout.

Later, Starr wrote about the meeting in her log:

> The meeting got us thinking. We haven't really worried much about aligning with standards because we all work so hard to provide quality education. I heard people expressing concern about the initial list. No one wants to lower expectations to meet state expectations. I don't think that will happen, but I do think we will need to do a lot of talking and thinking together. We are used to that, so I don't see a problem.
>
> This was a typical language arts meeting. Everyone expresses ideas and most are heard. Even the least experienced feels free to talk. I like that.

There are times when people at Hudson have reconsidered whether or not they should continue having two sets of teams: the four-member interdisciplinary teams and the subject departments. Lehrer mentioned in an interview that some staff members have suggested that "we should eliminate the departments and just put all the energy into teams. I could never allow that to happen," she explains:

> I think you need to balance both things. I think you need to have interdisciplinary concerns and look for connections in the world and ways to teach children that make the learning real and solid for them. But I also think, as a member of a discipline, [that] passion is a really key thing. People's passions are in different directions. I think you can derive great passion from your discipline.

Additional Collaborative Opportunities at Hudson

Starr has opportunities to work with other staff members at Hudson in collaborative ways for a variety of purposes. For example, in one year she served on two schoolwide committees; one focused on using technology and the other, on relationships between teachers and administrators

(the Teacher-Administration Liaison Committee, TALC). In addition, sometimes department meetings are extended to include another discipline. During one such meeting, language arts teachers, science teachers, their respective supervisors, and a librarian discussed the writing students are asked to do in science classes. Starr shared some of the rubrics she has developed to help her and her students better understand and assess writing assignments. She described the meeting in her log:

> We talked about how much writing goes on in science class. Students write lab reports, summaries, and research papers. We discussed how rubrics can help with evaluation for the teachers, and help parents and students understand expectations. We shared rubrics that are currently in use, and everyone agreed that this is a helpful practice.

Another example of the kind of professional sharing that Starr participates in at Hudson is an art workshop she attended. She not only learned a great deal during the workshop, but she was able to share ideas with the art teacher:

> The experience was wonderful — relaxing and gratifying. But even more, I enjoyed [the art teacher's] delightful teaching style and the way she encouraged her timid, adult students. It is valuable to see what and how other subject area teachers present and develop their curriculum.
>
> After the workshop, [the art teacher] and I started chatting. She shared how she used posters of artwork to draw out students and I shared my experiences with transparencies [works of art on transparency film that are sometimes included with literature anthologies because they relate to the literature presented]. She uses many of the techniques I use in literature discussions in her approach to thinking about and responding to art (Starr log, 4/9/97).

Later, Starr continued this conversation with the art teacher to further build on the ideas they had begun exploring together. In this, as in most of her other professional conversations, she is always seeking to learn more about her profession.

Another way that the spirit of collaboration and sharing are used to foster professional growth is the school policy of in-house observation. Teachers may request time off to observe a colleague's class whenever they like, for this is viewed as an important aspect of professional development.

Professional Associations

Starr is clearly a teacher whose professional activities are not confined within her classroom walls, or for that matter within the boundaries of her school. She participates very actively in the professional organizations in the field of language arts. She has written numerous journal articles (e.g. in *Language Arts* and *English Journal*). For an article in *English Journal,* she was awarded the Kate Farmer award by the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) for contributions to wider conversations in the field.

A decisive moment for Starr came in 1988 when she was invited to participate in a research collaboration with the National Research Center on Literature Teaching & Learning. "Curiosity" and "being intrigued about learning more about ways to engage students in thinking about literature" pushed her to participate in the project. Becoming involved with the university community had an energizing impact on her. She talks about making contact with the "real people" behind the articles she'd been reading in the many journals that Anderson or Lehrer had always been pointing out. She valued "the opportunity to really sit down and talk about things . . . [with] another community." It "broadens the horizon," she explained, counteracting the tendency for teachers to become isolated in their classrooms. This opportunity to stand back, reflect on, and learn more about teaching language arts was invaluable to her, and spurred her to join NCTE. It is noteworthy that Schoonhavn has strong professional ties to NCTE; both Anderson and Lehrer have leading positions, nationally and regionally, in NCTE. Thus they have been participating in and shaping the disciplinary discussions of the field and bringing that knowledge to Schoonhavn for a long time.

Starr is currently on the NCTE steering committee for the secondary level. In this role she reads hundreds of conference proposals and articles. However, when asked what, in all this reading, has really stood out to her, she mentions names of people she has actually worked with or listened to during presentations and workshops. Face-to-face interactions seem to be important, and fortunately Starr has experienced many of these. For example, in the spring Starr had to travel out of state twice for NCTE: for a working session of the steering committee and to chair a section of a spring conference.

Attendance at and participation in NCTE conferences have given her very rich material to ponder and have often left ideas percolating in the back of her mind. For example, after one

conference presentation by Shirley Brice Heath, Starr wrote in her log:

> Her strongest point for me was that children need the arts. She emphasized that her work showed that children need three things from life: connections, tasks, and art. I need to revisit her work (maybe this summer) before I can make connections with her talk.

As Starr engages in her professional work — reading conference proposals, chairing a session, or listening to presentations — she has a sounding board, a counterpoint to reflect on what she knows about teaching and learning language arts. In a way she is carrying on a dialogue with multiple professional voices. Her log entries bare evidence of this "conversation." Even though these threads of broader and more distant conversations may stay covert inside an individual's head, it seems they are important as seed beds for ideas, questions, and critiques to be developed and perhaps later articulated. Here are some issues the NCTE spring conference raised in her mind: "I always worry when an idea becomes a package. What I hope all teachers will do [is] use the book as a starting point and make it fit their needs rather than seeing it as 'the way' to teach literature" (Starr log). In response to another presentation, she expresses her deeper concern:

> The audience didn't seem to be concerned that the activities distributed required the students to display almost no understanding of the books, make no comparisons between and among the cultures represented, or engage in no conversations about their understandings or questions. As I was worrying about the message going out, especially to the young people in the audience, I jotted down the following quotes from the lead presenter (make a paper airplane, origami, design a T-shirt, etc.). All of those are fun activities but can not replace writing and discussing ideas. . . . How can these people [teacher presenters], who are well meaning, be encouraged to look more deeply at their practice? How can we help teachers move beyond projects to thinking? (Starr log, pp.42, 44, 45).

Sometimes the ideas Starr encounters in these professional associations come together in a way that changes how she teaches and become a catalyst for extending her knowledge. For example, in her work with the national research center, Starr learned a great deal about using an inquiry approach to teaching literature. But at first she hadn't been able to extend that approach to students' research projects. Two additional professional development activities helped to give her the ideas and impetus needed to try inquiry-based research with her students. First, she participated in a technology workshop in Hudson's library. Then she attended a districtwide

three-day workshop on inquiry given last summer by an NCTE staff member (who actually worked with Starr beforehand to help refine the presentation). As a result, in the fall, for the first time she structured a research project for her students using an inquiry approach. Students researched African American contributions to society based on their own questions. As a concluding phase, Starr and the school librarian discussed the research project and then wrote a short note about the future development of inquiry-based research in a library publication.

In her log, Starr documented the conversation with the librarian and gives evidence of assessing students' learning during the inquiry and extending her own understanding of what it means to use inquiry as a tool for learning. She structured this conversation in terms of "gain" and "losses":

> 8:00 a.m. this morning I met with [the] librarian to discuss research project completed last fall. The point was to use inquiry to get students excited about research and to really get them to search for information:
>
> We talked about gains:
>
> a. Students phrasing own questions and then rephrasing those questions when search redirected them.
>
> b. Students finding resources far broader than in past.
>
> c. Students using Internet to gain information.
>
> d. Students searching outside of school not only in libraries but in record and video outlets, etc.
>
> e. Students developing wide variety of ways to present knowledge.
>
> "Losses" (as viewed by some):
>
> a. [No] Guaranteed coverage of certain topics since students used own questions and interest.
>
> b. No formal writing pieces since students selected own format for sharing knowledge.
>
> c. [No] Control over use of research material — could not be sure every student "hit" basic reference sources.
>
> The one thing we both agreed on was that we should try this again. We need to give students more time and freedom to explore and to provide more opportunities for creative expression.

Thus in the example above, conversations were carried out across different contexts, at different times, and with different colleagues. Starr built on and extended her professional knowledge through this web of interactions. The different layers of professional networks were instrumental in extending her knowledge and practical pedagogy about a specific concept, inquiry. It's no wonder that she characterizes her professional associations as "amazing growth opportunities."

How Language Arts Are Taught and Learned in Starr's Classroom

Cathy Starr is an energetic woman who is totally absorbed by and focused on her seventh grade students during language arts class. Wearing soft-soled shoes, she moves among the groups of students, scaffolding discussion or checking the thinking at the tables or reading and commenting on students' work. When stopping to talk with a student she lifts her glasses, which have been perched on her nose, to the top of her head. Her voice carries genuine warmth and excitement. Her enthusiasm and interest are reflected by the class. A student turned to an observer in the classroom during an initial observation and announced: "Mrs. Starr is the best teacher in the world."

Her classroom is filled with books. Large, metal storage shelves containing boxes with student folders, copies of literature anthologies, books on language arts scholarship (including authors such as Atwell, Langer, Probst, and Scholes) cover one wall. A smaller bookcase is loaded with approximately 500 paperback novels. The teacher's desk, swelling with papers, is tucked in a corner. Posted along one wall is the text, "We read to know we are not alone."

Instead of having individual desks, students sit around tables arranged in an octagon. During presentations and whole class discussions, students push their chairs, which have tennis ball-cushioned legs, into a circle in front of the tables. The classroom is physically arranged to facilitate interactions where students' voices are heard. Indeed, students have many opportunities to listen to, converse, and work with each other. In fact, they were often observed leaving the classroom still talking together about issues discussed in class.

The approach Hudson takes toward the teaching of language arts as well as the skills and knowledge that should be learned at various grade levels is described in a district document,

Language Arts Expectations. This concise five-page document was developed and revised by a committee of administrators, teachers, and parents. It states:

> English language arts instruction in the Schoonhavn School District is based on the study and use of language. Language is a means of structuring and representing knowledge. As children listen, speak, read, draw, or write, they construct meaning through language. Language, by its very nature, is dynamic, full of power, meaning, and complexity. Its social nature allows students to become active language users through listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Language can empower students and play a key role in helping them become responsive, informed citizens. . . . Knowledge and use of the conventions of grammar, usage, spelling and punctuation are critical to effective communication. In the classroom, these skills are introduced, directly taught, modeled and practiced within the context of meaningful language experience.

As for how language arts fits into the interdisciplinary approach at Hudson, assistant superintendent Anderson explained that language arts teachers "have a responsibility to help students to be powerful with language."

> Part of where you get that power is in the literary. But you also need the experience of writing about the nonliterary — to use that language and power that you discovered here [in language arts classes] in situations that help you negotiate the world (interview, 5/13/97).

Starr appreciates the district's philosophy about teaching language arts. Her students learn about and use language in a stimulating yet safe environment where thinking is valued and encouraged, and listening and responding respectfully to one another is the norm. A large part of her instruction is devoted to helping students "be able to think and share ideas — take what other people say, maybe process that, and weigh it and balance it against what [students] know and think." In Starr's classroom, every important assignment culminates in a public presentation through which the student not only demonstrates content knowledge but also communicates that knowledge in a suitable format (e.g. a formal report for research, a story for a family history). Thus, every student is encouraged to develop oral as well as writing skills.

When, at the end of the school year, the six students I interviewed were asked to fill in a questionnaire describing what they had learned in their English class, five students indicated that they learned to improve their writing; several had learned to consider and appreciate different views, and some added to the list that they learned to carry on a class discussion about books. For

example, Keona wrote that she had learned:

> 1. How to write a poem. 2. Essays 3. Looked at art pieces the way we looked at stories
> 4. Class discussions-different opinions 5. Learned about each other and ourselves.

Peter wrote: "I have learned spelling, better grammar, punctuation, and word usage. I have learned to write stories better & more fluently. How to understand peoples ideas."

Keona's answer to a question about what she thought you needed to learn in English was: "To read, understand poems and Art, understand people's opinions and differences." Clearly, for these students Starr's classroom is a place not just to study language and its conventions, but also a place to *use* language and become better at reading, writing, and communicating knowledge to others. In addition, students say they have learned to take something they know how to do (interpret stories) and apply that knowledge in a new situation (looking at art).

So, how does Starr facilitate language arts learning? When asked what takes place in her classroom, she replies: "lots of reading, lots of writing, lots of discussion, lots of student questions."

"Lots of Reading"

According to Starr, the primary part of language arts is literature. Students in her classroom read extensively and respond to what they're reading by writing in their journals. All seventh grade classes at Hudson read the same two full length novels during the year. Starr's students also read and discuss numerous short stories and poems. Independently each student reads some 20 to 30 novels and reflects on this reading by writing regularly in their journals about them, generating questions, and capturing their understanding of character, plot, etc. Reading and writing work in tandem in Starr's classroom. She uses journal writing as an opportunity to assess and assist students' developing abilities to express themselves. Her written comments are supportive, encouraging, and instructive. For example, in the case of Jason, who had recently moved to the district, Starr responds to his first journal entry: "Jason, when you write, try to stay focused on one idea."" In response to Matt, who had written an entire page about "Rules" in one paragraph, she wrote: "You have a good idea here. You need to add some punctuation."

Starr expects students to engage actively and thoughtfully in their reading. For example, one

reading assignment in early fall involved reading a short story, "Eleven" (an essay about an unpleasant event in school). To help students interact mindfully with a text Starr asked them to read with a pen and a pencil in their hands. The students read the piece twice, each time writing their comments and questions directly on the page, first with one utensil and then the other. Thus, not only was thinking made overt, but the use of different colors in recording ideas revealed the added layers of student thought. Colleen circled and underlined portions of the text and then wrote her comments next to them, commenting on both content and craft. For instance, she underlined the sentence: "Only today I wish I didn't have only eleven years rattling inside me like pennies in a tin Band-Aid box." and she wrote "Good simile" next to it, and wrote these notes in the margin: "That makes a lot of sense. I remember that a lot." Starr's comment on the top of the page read: "Great way to respond to literature! I like your thinking! A+"

As with these examples, Starr frequently makes sure she uses her responses to scaffold students' growing ability to communicate their ideas clearly. Sometimes, however, she feels the need is simply to express care and interest. For example, when Amanda wrote in her journal about a difficult family situation, Starr showed her support by writing: "You are really being strong!" and elsewhere "Let me know how the hayride was. You are fortunate to have so many family members nearby. I grew up in a situation like that and it was great fun."

"Lots of Writing"

At Hudson, writing is an integral part of envisioning literature (Langer, 1995). It is used as a thinking tool for students as they read novels — making predictions, asking questions, and summarizing what they have read so far. Students also learn to use strategies such as Venn diagrams and idea maps to aid them as they think through how to organize their ideas for their writing projects. Starr's students do a great deal of writing and learn to write for a variety of purposes: for getting into and thinking through an assignment, for communicating ideas to others, and for expressing themselves. They write in several genres, such as poetry, letters, narratives, and fairy tales. They also write for practical reasons such as record keeping and managing tasks. For example, during the inquiry research project, students reflected upon the inquiry process by writing notes in their journals about what they had done so far and what they needed to do next.

Writing projects go through several stages. Students are assisted throughout the process; for example, every writing assignment includes a conference with a peer or a teacher. All students have "work-in-progress" folders. They keep an editing sheet inside these folders to help them and their peer readers check the content, grammar, punctuation, and spelling of their pieces. During peer conferences when students are reviewing their work together, students know that they need to stay focused, respectful, and thoughtful. "Our kids, to a huge extent, see themselves as writers," explained department chair Lehrer (interview, 4/18/9). One such student, Nick, describes in an interview his strategy for writing an assigned essay:

> I thought I did pretty good on [the essay], 'cause I got real, I explained it good, and I thought about it a lot. I made two different types of plans. That way I would get it almost perfect. Before I do the rough draft, I did a web [in which] you write your subject and different things going off on your subject. Then I did idea boxes — you just put the things that you would like to put in your essay in a couple of categories. I figured each of those categories would be separate paragraphs, and I could work from there. Then after that, I showed my mom. She's like the editor of the family, and so she evaluated that. Then I typed it up on the computer.

Students have a sense of ownership about their writing. When Starr gives an assignment, she seldom controls the topic or form but explicitly teaches several different genres (e.g. persuasive essay, poem). She encourages students to use their personal experience or own understanding of an issue as a starting point. When asked to provide topics for a persuasive essay, students suggested: a study on school lunches, making lockers bigger, the snack bar in the cafeteria, a family vacation, and what it is like to be a thirteen-year-old boy. For example, Ben used one such opportunity to air his annoyance at the narrowness of school lockers and wrote a persuasive essay to argue for roomier storage for students. The texts written by students are usually performed and shared with an audience. Thus their pieces of writing become literary artifacts with an expectation of audience response.

An example of very personal writing is a week-long poetry unit that resulted in a plethora of poems, which were then read by students and enjoyed and responded to by listeners. As with all of the assignments in Starr's classroom, this project grew out of a shared experience during which students learned to consider best examples of the craft (in this case a poem by Robert Frost). They then tried to write poems on their own. It was an accumulative experience that built from one lesson to another. Starr explains what she did in the poetry unit this way:

> I . . . read this poem one day and said, "What bothers you? What don't you understand?" And then the second day I said, "What questions do you have? What do you think it means?" [The n]ext day [we] listened to the sounds, and the next day we talked a little bit about the vocabulary. We talked about rhyme scheme and sounds.

In addition to listening to poetry and considering the literary devices of the genre, students were engaged in looking at pictures of paintings as well. As described above, Starr had participated in a workshop given by the school art teacher. Starr then talked further with the art teacher to explore how she could use art to help her students experience and create their own literature. Starr decided to try connecting the interpretation of a painting with writing poetry. During her unit on poetry, therefore, she included some lessons in which she led a discussion about individual paintings, the feelings they evoked, and how they can help viewers construct meaning and then interpret art through poetry. For her students this meant a whole new kind of learning and stretching, as evidenced by their comments on the end of the year questionnaires quoted above. As an example of the kind of learning that occurred, here is a poem that Ted wrote after studying the painting he chose ("Wake of the Ferry II," John Sloan, 1907):

> It's bleak, it's bleak
> What is the mystique
> He stands alone.
> It's bleak, it's bleak, where floor boards creak,
> He stands alone.
> It's bleak, it's bleak, where most are meek,
> He stands alone.
> It's bleak, it's bleak where most are weak,
> He stands alone, he stands alone.

He explains his thoughts as he was crafting the poem:

> Dreary day, and like, someone, some lonely person or something like that, just standing there or looking out at something. I just tried to, like I looked at the picture and saw that it was dreary and it would be hard to rhyme stuff with dreary, so I felt like I was in the mood for a rhyming poem you know. And, so since that was kind of hard to rhyme enough with dreary, so I decided to go with bleak, since that was my second word that I had in my mind, and I found four good words that fit the poem, that rhymed with bleak, and so I worked around that, and kind of made it a repeat, a repetitive poem, except a couple of words changed, like we've seen examples of it in the book, and I kind of like that style, and so I decided to do it like that. . . . I made three drafts. . . . I molded it pretty

good, so to speak.

For the most part, grammar is taught within the context of students' writing. Especially at the beginning of the year, Starr gives daily mini lessons on grammar, with related worksheets. But most of the grammar instruction comes from her corrections and comments on students' writing assignments. It is within this context that she focuses on punctuation, spelling, literary terms, and usage. Vocabulary development, too, comes in context — e.g. numerical prefixes in a unit on Mayan culture and symbol systems, etymology while researching students' family names. In addition, Starr displays posters of grammar rules (e.g., it's vs. its) throughout the room so that students can use them for reference when writing and editing. Her approach to teaching grammar aligns with the state language arts frameworks, quoted in Schoonhavn's "Language Arts Expectations":

> Skills are taught when students' work and/or performance indicate a need for them. Teachers understand that skills are acquired through experience and development, as well as through direct instruction and demonstration. The emphasis is on learning language within a context of purposeful language use.

"Lots of Discussion, Lots of Student Questions"

Students have numerous opportunities to share their ideas with each other through whole-class and small-group discussions as well as in responding to each others' writing. For example, Amanda wrote that what she liked best about language arts class was "working with other people, because I get to learn new ways of looking at things, and I like being able to make a say in what we do" (questionnaire, 4/14/97). Clearly there is a climate of respect, openness, and participation that helps facilitate such interaction. Starr's interactions with and comments to students serve as an excellent model for students as they learn how to establish and maintain this valued climate.

Starr encourages participation to such an extent that she invited parents to participate in literature discussions on the book, *The Giver*. The book contains contemporary issues and controversies, and Starr thought it would provide an opportunity for parents to have some input into what went on in her classroom. And indeed, many parents participated in whole class

literature discussions on *The Giver*.

An example of the central role that student-to-student discussion and student participation play in her classroom is the final exam Starr assigned her class. This culminating activity lasted for two weeks and required students to work both within a group and individually. The actual assignment is printed below.

This exam shows the key role Starr assigns to the process of students learning from each other. Students are expected to articulate their (momentary) understandings of the short story to each other in their small groups and then, through discussion and individual and group writing, present the group's collective understanding of the text. Students were very thoughtful in their responses to each others' ideas. For example, in response to one student's journal entry, another student wrote: "I think that your response is just like mine except that you needed to have a better choice of words. I agree that Jo and her brother had a normal relationship." Another student wrote: "Although I disagree with your opinions, you wrote this entry pretty well." And Nick had this response attached to his entry: "In reading Nick's response to the story 'Rip van Winkle' it seemed to me that Nick was confused about what was going on because [of] all the questions he would have liked to ask Mr. Irving. To me though, if Nick had all the questions he asked answered, he might have enjoyed the book more. Sincerely, Patrick."

As can be seen, students offered helpful comments to their peers in a thoughtful and respectful way. And students seemed to learn a great deal from each other in this kind of context, as Daniel showed in this comment: "Right now we are taking a final exam and it is teaching me how to work better in a group. I think that it is kind of fun and a good thing to do. It helps me focus better and get to know the story better" (Daniel's questionnaire).

The example of Starr's final exam shows how she helps students learn to use language as a purposeful tool. It also emphasizes that learning is supported by participation in a group. And finally, the teaching and learning of English in her classroom is always geared toward the future. Even the final examination is a learning experience.

Seventh Grade Language Arts Final Examination

Task:
You will with a group of no more than four students complete this assignment. Together you will select a short story to study. At the end of your study, you will prepare a presentation for the class that will share your learning.

Expectations:

Group

1. Choose a story from the list that everyone agrees to read.
2. Develop a plan for reading.
3. Complete required group assignments (discussion).
4. Prepare a presentation for the class.
5. Assign responsibilities to each member of the group.
6. Be considerate of other groups' efforts.

Individual

1. Read the story according to schedule developed by group.
2. Participate in group discussions and activities.
3. Complete individual assignments.
4. Actively participate in group presentation.
5. Be considerate of other students' needs.

Requirements:

Group

1. Develop a calendar for reading and discussion.
2. Hold at least one group discussion. Complete notesheet for each discussion.
3. Complete at least one written conversation in pairs or triads.
4. Have group members share journal entries at least once.
5. Research information about the author of your story. (Optional)
6. Maintain all record sheets in group folder.
7. Prepare a script for the group presentation.

Individual

1. Write at least one journal entry about this story. Use the techniques we have used when reading novels and short stories during the school year. You may include sketches in your entries.
2. Respond to entries of other group members.
3. Complete all tasks assigned by group.

Assessment

Three characteristics stand out regarding Starr's approach to assessing her students' work. First, assessment is closely woven into instruction; it is built in as a thread running through the assignments. Second, she is flexible in designing assessments, allowing them to evolve as needed. Third, her assessments focus on students' strengths.

One of the primary ways that Starr integrates assessment into instruction is through rubrics. She develops rubrics (documents that spell out the expectations and corresponding point/grade allocations for assigned work) for each assignment. She also has general rubrics that students can use as they are editing, revising, and assessing their own or a peer's writing. Each rubric includes a self-assessment component so that students are constantly required to assess their own learning and performance. She explains that her rubrics serve many purposes:

> Early in the year I use [rubrics] so that the students know the expectations for the assignment. The parents like having it as well. It helps them focus on areas for improvement as they assist with the work. It is a tremendous help to me as I grade assignments. . . . I think I can be more objective when it is clear to me *what* I expect. Then, as the students become more familiar with the rubric, they can get a better sense of *how* well they have met expectations in addition to *what* those expectations are (Starr log, 3/19/97).

She also ties assessment to instruction when she grades student writing. She writes comments directly on the pages of students' journals, as shown above, and also grades for effort and completeness. For note-taking while reading a story, she gives credit for "asking good questions and showing thinking and engagement." In order to push reluctant students to use journals to reflect on their own effort during an inquiry project, Starr decided she needed to read and assess each student's writing more frequently. In fact, she graded each journal entry "to get them to evaluate the experience" and to help students develop a habit of reflective writing, since students would be using the journals to record their thoughts while reading novels later in the year. By putting a great deal of focus on commenting on and evaluating student journal entries, Starr is using this kind of on-going assessment as an instructional tool.

Second, Starr lets the form of her assessments, specifically the final exam, evolve over a period of time. At Hudson, language arts teachers and interdisciplinary teams have much leeway in designing their individual final exams, which tend to take the form of a five-day writing exam.

Starr thinks about the final exam throughout the year, taking into consideration situational needs and where students are in their learning. By November she had noted that "many of her students [this year] will need a more structured approach" for the final exam than last year's class, which prepared learning portfolios.

Third, for Starr, assessment is a means of finding out and showing what students are able to do rather than what their shortcomings are. She uses assessment to focus on students' strengths. In addition to the many oral and written presentations students are required to do during the year, she also encourages students to express themselves in other forms, including illustrations, photographs, videotapes, music, and sculpture. For example, because the social studies and science classes included writing components in their final exams last year, Starr decided not to have students do more writing for the language arts exam. She wrote in her journal that January: "I would also like to give kids who are not strong writers an opportunity to bloom and prove themselves in other forms." She finally decided to have students reflect on their most meaningful learning experiences inside and outside of school and to prepare a "learning portfolio" to present to two readers and the class. The assignment was a very well-crafted and powerful tool for self-reflection and it also became an important link between the child, the learner, and the home.

The Relationship between Starr's Professional Life and the Way Language Arts Is Taught and Learned in Her Classroom

Hudson Middle School's philosophy statement emphasizes that "All members of the school community are continually involved in the active process of learning." As a member of the Schoonhavn Central District community and as a teacher at Hudson Middle School, Starr is able to partake in a very rich professional life. The learning experiences available to her as a Schoonhavn teacher — the various participatory meetings, workshops, networking opportunities, and involvement in virtually every level of school activity (goal-setting, planning, decision-making, curriculum development) — are exemplary. And they model, in many ways, the kind of exemplary learning experiences available to her language arts students. For example, the district and the school have an "expectation of participation and input." Assistant Superintendent Anderson doesn't make goals without involving teachers. Hudson language arts supervisor

Lehrer encourages teachers to think through and share their thoughts about how the department should handle issues such as state writing standards. Teachers are willing to participate because they feel respected and supported. In addition, teachers are given the time and forum to work and discuss issues together.

One could draw parallels to Starr's language arts class. Students are encouraged to participate and to feel a sense of ownership about their writing and learning, often choosing the topic, approach, or form of their work. They feel respected and cared for when they see their teacher's responses to their journals and other writing assignments. Students are also given ample opportunities to discuss with and learn from their peers during their many whole-class and small-group discussions and their group assignments and exams. In short, Starr treats her students in very much the same way she is treated by her supervisors and colleagues. The climate of respect, openness, supportiveness, and participation that Starr experiences in her professional activities is the same climate that permeates her classroom. And it is this kind of climate that fosters language skills. As the district document *Language Arts Expectations* explains: "The environment for learning language is rich, filled with opportunity and invitation to speak, read, write, and listen. Students are immersed in language and literacy experiences that interest, engage, and challenge them."

Such an environment encourages students and teachers to be willing to experiment and take risks, and thus grow and learn. For example, as shown above, Starr's experiences with the national research center and an NCTE workshop gave her the idea to try an inquiry-based approach for a student research project. After the project, she and the librarian could talk about the gains and losses resulting from such an approach. The school provides the kind of environment that encourages taking new approaches. The result is that students are given new and better ways to learn and grow as well. As their philosophy statement suggests, "Hudson Middle School is an exciting learning community."

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